EAST OF SINGAPORE

by

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Anything can Happen

With 54 Illustrations

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CHAPTElt

TO THE PACIFIC

PERCHED ON A HIGH STOOL AT A COUNTER IN THE BILTMORE COFFEE SHOP, Los Angeles, I was consuming a fruit sundae.

Even if my curiosity had not been roused by the mention of my own country, I could not have avoided hearing snatches of a conversation between the man on the next perch and his neighbour.

At that time the political outlook in Europe was passing through one of its black phases, but the war of 1939 had not yet come. And this is what I heard:

"... this world situation must be brought to an end. Don’t know how it seems to you. To me there seems nothing else for it. We must stand in with England and France——. Can’t leave England to save the world——. Both Mussolini and Hitler look to me like bluffing. Hitler might draw back, but I don’t think he will——. Can’t leave it all to England—— too much——."

So far from America herself being threatened, the peace of Europe was not yet broken; yet these already then were the sentiments of one at least of the hundred and thirty million citizens of the United States.

A few hours later all that remained for me of Los Angeles was a strong odour of sardines and some distant lights.

The coloured paper streamers which had joined us to the shore had snapped their frail bonds; the tumultuous quayside farewells and the music of departure were silenced; the great ghostly oil tanks had melted away into the distance and then into the darkness.

Looking landward I sighed: "Farewell, America!" and added with quick determination: "But au revoir!" Then I moved around the deck to the starboard and looked into the velvet darkness and the Pacific.

It was not yet ‘farewell America,’ for it was an American vessel which was gliding out into the world’s largest and deepest ocean; and there were to be two ports of call in islands under the American flag before I came to the Union Jack again. Besides, although there were aboard a considerable number of Australians and New Zealanders returning home, and a contingent of Bradford wool buyers on their way to New Zealand—some of whom I later recognized waving frantic arms at the Wellington wool sales—the majority of the passengers were citizens of the United States.

During the bright days which followed it was a joy to glide along and to contemplate a sea as pacific as its name—translucent, cornflower blue and sparkling with glinting dimples. The water was full of colour even on the port side in the midday hours when the ship cast its own dark shadow there. But it was not the solid blue of other brightly coloured seas which I had seen; such was this sea’s transparency that, but for its great depth, surely the sight could have penetrated to the very ocean bed! On the starboard at midday the water under that pitiless sun was almost emptied of colour; its smooth, pallid blue gleamed like a mirror.
The little flying fish would leap up, skim across the water, a flash of blue and pink and silver, and vanish again into its depths. And it seemed to me that the stately vessel moved onward with a contented hum as she breasted the blue tide joyously and fared forth to a landless world.

In the early hours of the third day out from the Californian coast, the dim shapes of the Hawaiian Isles lay like shadows on the horizon. Mystery hangs about an unknown land, and since I had as yet visited no Pacific Isles, for me the very word Hawaii was golden with glamour.

Having breakfasted as early as permitted by the Seamen's Union—and this was not as early as I could have wished—I was on deck again to find that we were already within the Hawaiian Group and rapidly approaching the island of Oahu and its city Honolulu, capital of the islands. The rectangular buildings gleamed white and pink in the keen sunlight; there was the luxuriant greenery of many trees and the slender stateliness of palms. Diamond Head stood out beyond the curve of a hidden bay.

Already some small vessels must have put out to meet the approaching liner, for the fragrant leis were being brought aboard, and presently someone popped over my head one of those coloured garlands woven of frangipani, hibiscus, sweet ginger flowers and other perfumed mysteries.

The town band (organized for King Kamehameha the Fifth in 1872 and now maintained by the city of Honolulu) was assembled on the quay. Its dusky members wore white clothing after the fashion of the western world; so also did the two brown ladies who broke into the Hawaiian song of welcome, 'Aloha Oe!' as we berthed.

Even before the gay welcome was ended or the ship had discharged its freight of honeymoon couples, the derricks had swung out and the day's work of unloading and loading less piquant cargo had begun.

Already those of the through passengers who had not been that way before were hurrying down the gangway in order to see as much as possible before sailing time, to queue up at the several extra sales windows opened at the main post office for this occasion and to buy the new stamps issued that day in commemoration of King Kamehameha the Fifth. On the opposite side of the way from the post office a rapid trade was being done in decorative envelopes for first-day covers. (It wasn't a coincidence, remarked a cynic, that King Kamehameha's memory should be celebrated and a new stamp issued on the day when a large passenger liner was due in port. It wasn't a coincidence; it was a ramp.)

After this delay the sightseers hastened away in cars from the sophisticated city's large commercial blocks, its drug stores, its five-and-ten-cent stores and their canned foods, mass-produced goods and magazines (dealing with romance, sex, the talkies, astrology and crime) such as could have been bought in Los Angeles or any of the other cities left not many days behind. They sped past the sweet-smelling pineapple canneries or through the Japanese quarter where, despite the prevalence of conventional modern clothing, native Japanese dresses and paper parasols were to be seen; or they passed the homes of white American inhabitants where the coco-nuts from the squat Hawaiian palms lay on the green lawns like wind-fall apples, behind hedges of croton or flowering bushes; and past, too, richer and more magnificent homes in settings of blossoming trees, to the country beyond.

Those countless flowering trees and shrubs which give so much colour and such an air of luxury to Honolulu and which (like the people now inhabiting the city) have been brought in from other lands, seemed to me to be beyond the scope of computation. Someone said that there were four thousand varieties of the hibiscus alone! And but a few among the rest were scarlet poinsettias, blue morning glory, yellow acacia, red paric, the
flame tree, the pink tree orchid, the golden shower tree, bougainvillea of many shades, plumbago, magnolia, African tulip, rainbow hedge—but these were not all. I remember the sausage tree on which grow clusters of fruit which indeed resemble sausages; the Chinese banyan tree, the bread fruit tree with fruits like small green melons . . .

Beyond Honolulu itself and its many gardens, the lines of growing pineapples, the rice and the sugar plantations, the native ti-tree grows by the roadside, and the elephant ear vine (with leaves a couple of feet long) and many a feathery fern flourishes where cascades leap from the steep banks upon the hills. Cacti and night-blooming cereus grow about Mount Tantalus, the Hog’s Back and the Punch Bowl (shades of Surrey’s pleasant hills!) from whence you can look down upon the wide spreading valleys, the great city of Honolulu and the sea.

The Hawaiian Islands are the tops of a chain of volcanic mountains nearly four hundred miles long, thrown up from the ocean bed, their valleys lost in the depths below. On Oahu the volcanic nature of the soil is apparent. From the steep banks beside the roads cut through the hills, tons of black dust threaten to slide down on to the roadway; elsewhere is laval rock and bright red soil.

The green hills and mountains have a soft mild beauty, and you feel that you could put out your hands and touch the far velvety heights which are seamed with perpendicular streaks down which water courses in the rainy season.

This first glimpse of a tropical island, its warm humidity, soft atmosphere, deep colouring and luxuriant growth were wonderful to me. That sense of enchantment had not left me when I was taking luncheon (like an orthodox tourist) under the awnings and among the flowers on the terrace of the Royal Hawaiian Hotel. Pleasant, soft-voiced Orientals waited at table under the surveillance of a superior who spoke to us with a strange accent and was of unidentifiable race (or races), probably Latin.

I could ignore my sophisticated surroundings as I looked upon the broad yellow sands of Waikiki Beach up which the tide runs flatly. Probably I exclaimed in somewhat naive ecstasy at the varying greens and the pallid blues of the clear sunlit water, at the white lines of foam, the tall graceful Samoan palms (featured in publicity photographs) bowing their plumed heads in the mild breeze from the bay where the bronzed limbs of surf riders gleamed in the vivid light . . .

Next to me was an elderly woman from Sydney, large featured, hearty of speech, fair and flamboyant of colouring, over-dressed, over-jewelled, and emanating good-nature. She came that way every few years, she said, on her journey to and from England. As she removed her perfumed lei with a gesture which might have been symbolic, she smiled at me with humour and kindliness, looked about her at the bright beach and bay and said in a tone of surprising emotion: “But England is the loveliest place in the world, you know. It gets your heart.” She paused, then added: “We Australians speak of going there as ‘going home’.”

There was with us too, a lean blue-eyed sun-desiccated Australian who, while his eyes were turned to Waikiki Beach, had still more than half of his thoughts in the north-west corner of Europe. He believed in international co-operation, he said, and in League of Nations principles; but he saw that in order that those principles might be carried into practice Britain must arm, Australia must arm—and that right speedily. It is unlikely that he any more than I then imagined how soon London, capital of our Commonwealth of Nations, would become the refuge of so many governments,
monarchs and presidents as to constitute a League of Nations in itself.

While the bland Oriental was plying us with a sweet made from fresh coco-nuts grown in the hotel grove, and the obsequious Latin was putting before us a decorative basket of fruits, this Australian in support of his own convictions went back more than half a century and quoted Tennyson:

“For I dipped into the future, far as human eye could see,
Saw the vision of the world and all the wonder that would be;
Saw the heavens filled with commerce, argosies of magic sails,
Pilots of the purple twilight, dropping down with costly bales;
Heard the heavens filled with shouting, and there rained a ghastly dew
From the nations’ airy navies grappling in the central blue;
Far along the world-wide whisper of the south wind rushing warm,
With the standards of the people plunging through the thunder storm;
Till the war-drums throbbed no longer and the battle-flags were furled
In the Parliament of man, the Federation of the world.
Then the common sense of most shall hold a fretful realm in awe
And the kindly earth shall slumber, lapt in universal law.
Not in vain the distance beckons. Forward, forward let us range,
Let the great world spin for ever down the ringing grooves of change.”

But there was sight-seeing to be done. Edward, our handsome Hawaiian driver (one of the twenty-four thousand remaining pure Hawaiians), would be waiting to take us to the University, the Aquarium, a Japanese temple, a one-time Royal Palace, the barracks and flying grounds of the American Army and Air Force, the Museum and much else.

The regalia of the Hawaiian monarchy (now no more), the last king’s sword and cocked hat, his sceptre, orders and decorations are preserved in the Bishop Museum. So too, is the oil painting of the brown monarch himself (born 1836) and a print of ‘His Majesty, King of the Sandwich Islands, King Kamehameha the Second, drawn from life on stone by John Hayter and published by R. Ackerman, London, 1824.’ The latter shows a dignified monarch dressed in European clothing of the period. And I was particularly interested in the ‘Boxing Match before Captain James Cook at Owhyhee (Hawaii), Sandwich Isles, Thursday, January 28th, 1779, from an unpublished drawing by James Webber, draughtsman to the Expedition.’

Less than three weeks after that boxing match Captain Cook lost his life in a clash with the natives of Hawaii with whom he had been on friendly terms and had exchanged many gifts.

When an officer and some of the marines from the Resolution went ashore next day to recover his and other bodies they were given his bones and his hands, one of which could with certainty be identified by a scar which had been made by an accidental explosion of powder when Cook was serving with the naval squadron in support of General Wolfe at Quebec twenty years before.

Captain Cook must have found the Hawaiians living the same life, maintaining the same simple neolithic culture which had been theirs ever since they had come in their open canoes the journey of two thousand five hundred miles to their new home at the time of the dispersal of the Polynesian peoples from their home in Samoa.

In the little more than a century and a half since Captain Cook gave the islands the name of his patron Lord Sandwich, what changes have taken place among the population?

In the museum something of what had happened is shown by means of
a series of plaster casts taken from life from contemporary inhabitants of Honolulu, the ancestry of the originals being noted:

\[ \frac{1}{3} \text{ Hawaiian} - \frac{1}{6} \text{ White}, \]
\[ \text{Hawaiian} - \text{Portuguese}, \]
\[ \frac{1}{3} \text{ Hawaiian} - \frac{1}{4} \text{ Irish}, \]
\[ \text{Hawaiian} - \text{Chinese}, \]
\[ \text{Hawaiian} - \text{Chinese} - \text{White}. \]

Others have an ancestry of stated proportions of Korean, Filipino, Costa Rican and Hawaiian; and there are mixtures of Hawaiian-born Americans with Japanese and Chinese.

Our Edward told us that there are indeed people of every race under the sun in Honolulu—even an Eskimo.

The Hawaiian Isles which harbour this strange agglomeration of peoples have been called by the Americans 'The Cross-road of the Pacific.' A Pan Pacific Union sponsored the first meeting of the Institute of Pacific Relations in Honolulu in 1925. This was attended by nationals from all countries bordering on the Pacific.

My most immediate impression was that I had seen here in Hawaii a strong outpost of the American way of life; and it seemed to me that the attitude of Americans towards the less advanced peoples was very much like ours. Then in retrospect the Hawaiian Islands and their story came to typify for me the process which has been repeated whenever a people of primitive culture has come suddenly into contact with another people of more advanced mechanical knowledge. A similar sequence of events took place on the American continent, in New Zealand and Australia. Only one chapter—that of the Gold Rush—is missing from this story as it unfolds itself in the Pacific Isles.

The adventurous discoverers of new lands have always sooner or later been followed by missionaries bringing an untaught people a new religion, new diseases, alcohol and all-too-potent fire-arms, the introduction of which leads to a breakdown in the natives' social order. Next, the exploitation of untapped natural resources with the consequent demand for cheap labour leads to alien immigration and the decline of the native people.

Finally, the sovereignty has always inevitably passed into the hands of the more experienced white man whether he wishes it or no; his language and customs will tend gradually to be adopted and those of the native people to die out unless deliberately fostered and kept alive.

This series of events did in fact take place in the Hawaiian Isles, although in a more intense degree, naturally, near the regions of white settlement than in other parts of the islands. So completely modernized is Honolulu that poi, the staple diet of the Hawaiian people, which used to be made by pounding taro root with a stone pounder on a board of polished koa wood, is now made in factories open to the municipal poi inspector. The pieces of polished wood and stone for pounding have now become museum pieces on show in glass cases.

The cosmopolitan city of Honolulu has a population of close on a hundred and forty thousand, has for years been the playground of wealthy Americans, and has exported the products from the islands to almost every corner of the globe. A hundred and fifty years ago there still lived on that spot a people who used stone tools, and practised cannibalism as a religious and social rite. The speed of the changes which have taken place in the Pacific since Captain Cook sailed those waters takes one's breath away.

Although Spanish navigators from the Philippines touched at the islands in the sixteenth century, the Hawaiian Group was not again visited by white
people until Captain Cook's arrival two hundred years later. A dozen years after his death, Captain Vancouver (who had accompanied him on his last voyage) returned to the Sandwich Isles in the course of carrying out a commission from the British Government to survey the north-west coast of America and to take over some concessions from Spain there.

Vancouver introduced cattle, sheep, goats, orange trees, and grape vines. Although he refused to supply the natives with fire-arms, he advised King Kamehameha the First (who was just coming into power as conqueror and master of the whole group of islands) in the art of government and in dealing with foreigners. Vancouver promised to send missionaries to teach the people and left with King Kamehameha as advisers two able seamen, John Young and Isaac Davies, who ranked as chiefs and were allotted property.

Traders and settlers—English, French and American—began to arrive, bringing with them alcoholic drinks and diseases, neither of which the natives could withstand. (It is said that mosquitoes were unknown in the Hawaiian Isles until about 1828 when their larvae were brought in the tanks of whaling ships, and that leprosy, known there as 'Chinese disease,' was not known until 1864.)

Vancouver's promised missionaries from England had not yet come when in 1820 others arrived from the eastern states of America; they had travelled by way of Cape Horn—almost a six months' journey. A council of chiefs was called to decide whether to allow them ashore; John Young and Isaac Davies gave their votes in favour of so doing.

Eventually these missionaries were given grants of land which was discovered to be suitable for the cultivation of pineapple, rice and sugar; some of their descendants are among the wealthiest growers in the islands at the present day.

The Hawaiians were primarily seamen and their skill was quickly put to use by the white traders. The fact that from about 1840 to about 1846 a fifth of the men between the ages of fifteen and thirty were at sea or abroad was a serious loss to the Hawaiian people and contributed to their decline.

Those seafaring Hawaiian people saw no inducement to work on the soil and some Chinese labourers had already arrived to help with the cultivation of the new crops before the American Civil War. During that war the demand for Hawaiian sugar and rice increased so much that Chinese labour began to be brought in systematically. (Of all the racial mixtures in Hawaii to-day, the cross between Chinese and Hawaiian is considered to be the most successful. Its representatives combine Chinese industry with Hawaiian courtesy.) Other foreign workers were soon arriving—Portuguese, Costa Ricans, Filipinos, Koreans. A Treaty with Japan in 1886 was followed by a continuous stream of Japanese immigrants, and at the present time about fifty-five per cent of the population of Oahu, in which island Pearl Harbour is situated, is Japanese.

In view of present ambitions of the Japanese in the Pacific, it seems odd that they had not themselves already long ago discovered the Hawaiian Islands, which lie so many thousands of miles nearer to their shores than to the British Isles from which Cook and Vancouver sailed—so much nearer than to the shores of the eastern states of America, from which came the missionaries, the date of whose arrival marks the beginning of American influence which steadily increased. The relationship between the United States and the islands became gradually closer until the sovereignty of the Hawaiian Archipelago was formally transferred to the United States on August 12th, 1898.

The town band and the singers assembled again in early dusk to bid
farewell with their haunting native melodies, their ‘Aloha Oe’ and, finally (odd as this sounded to me from the lips of Pacific Islanders), ‘Auld lang syne.

When that inevitable rite with the paper streamers had been gone through, the vessel slid away into the dusk to the sound of plaintive music.

One of the deck stewards, leaning next to me on the rail and chatting with that easy friendliness customary to deck stewards who sail with the stars-and-stripes, pointed out a cluster of lights. ‘Pearl Harbour,’ he said, ‘Largest naval base in the world.’

“Our Gibraltar,” said another American at my elbow. I should not then have easily believed how soon America was going to need a Gibraltar in the Pacific.

When Diamond Head has been passed, but not sooner, etiquette bids you cast your lei into the ocean so that you will come back to the Hawaiian Isles again.

Not all the lei were thrown overboard. One is enough to ensure your return, and there were so many still on board that the whole vessel was filled with their perfume; the garlands were left fading in the state rooms; they were looped over the door knobs.

By day again the sky was an expanse of unsmirched brightness, but at evening clouds would appear and linger a little while, rimmed with light, about the horizon. Then a moon which was larger, more bold and luminous than any I had seen would drop a bright pathway over the dark still sea. That sky had a richer texture than any night sky I had known; it had unfathomable depth. The nearer wisps of cloud, the clouds which had floated up with the darkness, the lambent solid moon, and the clear stars were all suspended in the loftiness of space. The moon was no flat disc. The lustrous sky was not ‘thick inlaid with patines of bright gold.’ It had no flatness, and could not be inlaid. The earth had no roof; the heavenly luminaries hung in that same measureless space wherein our little world is spinning, too.

At a high noon hazy with heat the Equator was crossed without ceremony and two days later, again at early morning, the islands of Samoa appeared to starboard.

As we moved along the length of it the island of Tutuila was seen to be covered from water’s edge to topmost heights with the sage-green forest of the tropics. We swung round and rode into the wide circle of the harbour which is the crater of an extinct and submerged volcano and is entered from the south side where the rim has been worn away. But for this break it is encircled by precipitous and woody heights, a narrow strip of level land along its base appearing to provide the sole meagre foothold.

At the widening of this strip there was a cluster of grey huts among the tall palms on the yellow sands washed by the bright green water and the yellow foam; another ridge of snowy foam broke on a hidden reef and divided the bright green water from the bright blue of that deep harbour.

Farther within the curve of that harbour was a line of red-roofed bungalows and emerald lawns, the American Naval Base of Pago-Pago. As we approached, numerous little outrigger canoes came out towards us.

The passengers went ashore in launches, I with a Professor from a University of the Middle West and his wife, with whom I shared a table in the dining saloon. On the unpretentious little quay was a collection of amazing vehicles masquerading as buses, and a few cars which had been mustered from all over the island for the expected arrival of the liner; for the most part they were hard-tyred lorries supplied with temporary seats which were no more than boards, and with improvised awnings.

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